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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
Transcribed by [Name]**

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

**Jonathan Ice, age 60, Cedar Rapids, Iowa
Karen Keninger
11-5-2010
Mini Interview**

Karen Keninger: All right this is Karen Keninger and it is November 5th, 2010. I'm sitting here with Jonathan Ice, who is going to be interviewed briefly. And, I am going to tell you, Jonathan, that all of the stories submitted to this

project will become a part of the History of Blindness Collection owned by the Iowa Department for the Blind. Submitting your story means that you are acknowledging that your story is a gift, which transfers to the Iowa Department for the Blind all legal title and literary property rights. You are also granting the Iowa Department for the Blind an unrestricted license to use your recording and all information which it contains in any manner that the Department for the Blind may wish to use it, for as long as the Iowa Department for the Blind wishes to use it. Do you agree to have your story recorded?

Jonathan Ice: Yes.

Keninger: Okay, Jonathan tell me your name, and your age and your address, if you would please.

Ice: My name is Jonathan Ice. I am 60-years-old and I live at 509 20th Street North East, Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52402.

Keninger: All right, Jonathan this is part of the History of Blindness series that we're working on. Is there something particular that you had in mind to talk about today?

Ice: I think...I've been blind all my life, although I didn't know it till I was 20. And, I've lived in a number of other states in addition to Iowa. And so, coming here to Iowa 15 years ago and being able to compare the services for the blind in the different states was sort of an interesting thing in my life.

Keninger: Tell me about that.

Ice: I got into the blindness system at age 20. I was a sophomore in college and I had had a brief exacerbation of my condition and couldn't read, period, at that point. And, I knew I had to do something. Got in contact with another blind student on campus and he said, asked a few simple questions, "You realize you're legally blind and eligible for aid from the state?" Well, I wasn't up to that point. So, I was in Minnesota at the time, and so I finished up my college career there. Main kind of aid I got was with recorded books and that was sort of the extent of things then. And, I kept going back to college, as was my want over the years; and I was able to get books but I didn't really deal with the other ends of blindness much. And, then it was in my 30s that I started to realize, okay, this is having more than just a tangential affect on my life. I started experiencing some discrimination and other things along the way.

And, I had been looked at...I'd approached some people in Ohio for a year and a half and approached a person from Ohio agency for the blind and basically they said, "Well, we can't...we're not going to help you unless we rehabilitate you." If they had explained it more thoroughly I might have been interested, but they just said, "Well, we're going to fix you." (Laughter) And, I wasn't ready to be fixed at the time. And, then I got library services while I was a citizen of New York. And, then came back to Minnesota.

And, the place where it started to get interesting was when I finally started to...getting interested in working in Blindness Rehab. I had thought about it from time to time over the years, but I had always thought the Rehab. system is often more the problem than the solution, and I didn't

want to be part of the problem. But, things were starting to look up in the agency for the blind in Minnesota, and I thought, well hey, I'm going to start looking into this. So, I started moving in the way of that direction. Got my Master's degree, and ended up getting that. And, I did an internship along the way here at Iowa, just before I was doing my internship in Minnesota.

And, the thing that impressed me by the Department for the Blind here in Iowa was that it seemed like everyone was all on the same page. There was a sense of mission, a sense of commitment that is remarkable anywhere. And, maybe, I hesitate to say, especially remarkable for government job, because there's all this slamming of government workers going on. But anyway, it was very remarkable. And, when I started doing my internship in Minnesota I found no such situation with the agency there. People were all over the map in their attitude toward blindness, and so there wasn't this unifying sense. And so, when people from Iowa came asking me to...whether I was interested in getting a job down here...hey, got nothing to lose. Go down to Des Moines and I got it and I've been here for 15 years now. So, it's a long story there.

Keninger: That's okay. Jonathan, you have dealt with...you've got a fair amount of vision but you've basically dealt with vision loss with blindness all of your life one way and another. What ways have you found throughout the years that it's impacted the things that you do, and the way that you live, and the opportunities that you've had?

Ice: Well, back in...growing up in school the main thing that it did there, I couldn't...I had a hard time reading what was

being written up on the board. I was always able to read if I got close enough to the material and with enough stamina, so that was not a big problem either. I tended to be in the front row always in my classes, and sometimes even ahead of the front row to be able to see what was being written on the board.

Keninger: Did that placement in the classroom have any ramifications for you with regard to the other kids?

Ice: Somewhat; although, generally I was accepted. But, I was never one of the top popular kids there, and I suspect that had some effect on that. Other kinds of affects? Well, certainly it had an affect on, in athletic pursuits. I had lots of interest in doing that but I wasn't very good, and so I couldn't get any kind of distinction. I was usually one of the worst people in my age group at whatever sport it was, but that didn't discourage me from trying.

And, one of the interesting things about that was that because I kept on trying and kept on trying very hard, I suspect that that had something to do with the efficiency with which I'm able to use what vision I have. That's not something that we at the Department for the Blind do a lot of work on, and I can understand why. But, it's something that because I had worked so hard on it over the years, I think that made a difference there. I didn't start...I didn't learn Braille. I probably, if Braille had been suggested to me, then I thought, well, I can read print why should I learn Braille? But, if it had been suggested to me in the sense of being something interesting and something new and different, I was always intellectually curious. So, I might have bought it for that reason and then found out more.

Now, I would have loved to have had Braille back then because having learned it in my 40s I'm just not very fast and probably I will never be fast, but had I known it then it could have made a difference there.

Keninger: How does your family deal with your blindness?

Ice: My family was very...that was, I think, one of the things that really worked best for me. My Mother was the primary one who did the raising of us, and her attitude was very matter-of-fact when they found out that my vision was not good. And, she noticed that I was not tracking things normally when I was about six or eight months old. And, they had an ophthalmologist look in those eyes and saw enough scar tissue there to say, "This kid's only going to have light perception." And so, we lived in California at the time, and so they signed me up, put me on the waiting list for the school for the blind in California. But as time went on, it was obvious that I had more vision than that; but I was not coddled. And, that's one of the things I appreciate so much from my parents, was that they let me go and fall down and pick myself up again and keep on trying rather than protecting me from the hurts of what might happen.

10:00

Keninger: You have brothers and sisters?

Ice: Have five brothers and sisters.

Keninger: And, how did they treat you?

Ice: Quite well. I think as an adult sometimes get the stuff...yeah sometimes they, there was some resentment. I would get the front seat in the car more often. (Laughter) There were a few privileges that I might have had because of the vision, but by and large, it was all the same and I was quite adaptable. I was more of a peace maker, and so I got along with sisters who might be fighting among themselves, with siblings who might be fighting among themselves. As a result I never had a room of my own because I could always get along with the brother, with one of my two brothers, whereas they could not get along with each other at all. (Laughter) It was a good family to grow up in.

Keninger: Did you have chores as a kid?

Ice: Oh yes. Yes.

Keninger: And, the same expectations as your siblings?

Ice: Pretty much. I'm trying to think if there was anything that I was not expected to do. Don't think so. I mowed the lawn. I washed dishes and did the kind of stuff that everyone else did.

Keninger: Any episodes, any experiences that are related to your blindness that stand out in your life as kind of turning points or focal points?

Ice: If I had some more time to think about it I probably could, but, I could think of more. But, certainly one of the big ones for me was when I was in...once I had committed toward becoming, getting into the Rehab. field I went to the

Adjustment to Blindness Center in Minneapolis, Blind Incorporated, and spent nine months there as a part time student. And, one of the things that I did, and particularly enjoyed, was cane travel which I'd never had any significant training in that before, not with sleep shades. So, as a result I'm carrying, using this cane, for the first time in my life on a regular basis.

And, about, oh, halfway through the training I had a day when I had to travel; I was going to go to the hardware store and pick something up. And, got there and I noticed how easy it was to find the stuff because I had the cane. My experience up to that point had always been, I'd ask questions, and I was not shy about saying I'm legally blind. But, I would ask where is something; they would point at something. Couldn't know where it was, so I asked for a better verbal explanation. They'd get all flustered about it. It got to be I was regularly having a bad experience with things like that. I noticed that I went to this hardware store, I think, that time the clerk was too busy to be able to take me right there, but often they will do that. But, gave me very explicit instructions down the third row go to the left on the right side about halfway down on the third shelf; and I was able to find it. And, hey, this is different. I like this! (Laughter) When I use the cane and I'm looking for a bus, they don't just say, "It's up on the sign board." If I ask for the number, they'd actually tell me the number of the bus.

Keninger: Because they saw that you had the cane and, therefore, assumed that you needed that information.

Ice: Yeah. Typically, if I didn't have a cane they would just say, "It's up there in full view." I tell this all the time. I'd

much rather be blind than illiterate or stupid, and that's generally how people treated me when I asked those questions. And so, that was a real epiphany for me. And it's basically been since then, and then moving here to Iowa where I had, could set up my persona as a cane traveler. Those two together made it so that almost all the time I'm using a cane these days.

Keninger: Do you use the cane the way, I mean, obviously as an identification tool, but do you use it as an actual travel aid?

Ice: Oh yeah. Now, to be honest most of the time I could walk anywhere without any problems without a cane, but I never know when those occasional times are when that's not enough. And so, I've been careful when I'm walking around that I use the cane properly. And, that's paid off a few times in unexpected places.

I was in Washington D.C. about two or three years ago on a grey, sunless day. Was at the Jefferson Memorial, which is all white marble, no contrast, no shadows, no sun; and I'd just finished looking at Tom up there in the top, and I decided oh I'm going to take a look at the Potomac River. So, I started going ahead and walking along tapping the cane properly, and didn't realize, ha, that cane just dropped. Looked down and I could hardly see it, there were three steps. (Laughter) That saved me from a pretty nasty fall. And, that's probably the most dramatic thing like that, that has happened.

But, occasionally, I'll be in restaurants where the lighting is poor. I may not be able to see a ramp or a step, and the cane is very helpful for things like that. I don't have

to go leading with my foot to check to see whether there's a drop or what this thing is. The cane gives me that information in advance.

Keninger: Do you ever hear people say what are you using that cane for, you're not blind?

Ice: Oh yeah. Yeah I've had that happen, and I can say I am. I can see some but it's not enough all the time. Now, other kinds of things that were epiphanies...

I guess, the first really obvious job discrimination I think that I had...Up until then I pretty much thought, well, these things just sort of happen, and it might be all kinds of things. But, at that time, I was trying to get myself into physical therapy as a profession. I had to do all this pre-med stuff, and among other things, most of the physical therapy schools required that you have some kind of volunteer or paid work in a medically related field. And so, I had been trying to get stuff as orderly or various other things in nursing homes or hospitals around. And, I had...there was this patient transport job at one of the hospitals in Minneapolis; and I had basically been hired on. And, all that I had to do was go through the physical and start the job. And, I did the physical; and, of course, legally blind, that got back to them. "Oh, you can't hire this person." And, never mind the fact that I would have had no trouble.

Keninger: Patient transport, I assume that just means moving people around the halls of the hospital?

Ice: Right. And, that was before ADA. So, basically I had no law to stand behind on that one. And so, I basically didn't get the job. That was the most obvious.

You know, there were other ones where it might have had an affect. But, I think it drives a person crazy wondering whether it's due to the blindness or something else because people generally don't tell you what the real reason is. So, those are the ones that come to my mind any way.

Keninger: Okay. Well, thank you! That's very interesting.

Ice: Yeah, and I hope that there's something useful I've told you here.

Keninger: I think there is. I think so. We have another tape that talks about your hobbies, and some of that from Karla's perspective. And, that might be kind of interesting to get a counter-point to some time, although I don't know whether we have time today. But, that might be interesting as well. Well, if you think of other things that you might want to chat about, you'll be back by then.

20:13

(End of Recording)

Beverly Tietz

7-3-2011